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Hostages' Joy Over Freedom May Hide Deeper Damage, Psychologists Warn

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An elated nation that watched the American hostages' smiling, waving flight to freedom should not turn off its concern along with the television set, experts on the psychology of captivity warn.

"They look so happy — that's the sadness of it," says Charles Stenger, director of services for American Ex-Prisoners of War, an organization of some 94,000. "They've survived, but it's left its mark."

The big danger now for hostages, families and public alike, said Stenger, a 58-year-old Bethesda psychologist who was captured by Germans in the 1944 Battle of the Bulge, "is in wanting to pretend it's all over, it's all behind them."

"The thing to look out for now is what we refer to as the 'second injury' — the damage that can result later from the failure of people to understand and respond to the residual effects of the captive's experience."

Psychologists agree that the outward appearances of exuberance expressed by the freed Americans during their stopover in Algeria and their arrival in Germany may belie the deeper psychic damage suffered during their 15 months of internment.

"All of them looked sad to me," said Staff Sgt. James Hughes, one of 13 hostages freed soon after militants took over the U.S. Embassy. "They had that sadness in their eyes."

Even in these brief televised glimpses, the trained eyes of medical authorities could detect subtler symptoms of problems to come.

"I was struck by a remark made by one of the Algerian pilots," one psychologist said. "He described the hostages as being 'like trained animals.' And indeed it did seem odd, the way they did what they were told, they didn't get out of line, how totally docile and manageable they were despite their joy."

Dr. Margaret Singer, a Berkeley, Calif., psychologist who has done extensive "de-programming" work with POWs and cult victims, said some of the hostages "looked awfully geared down" — a psychological term, she explained, used to describe the way victims in life-threatening situations deliberately reduce their level of feeling in order to cope with stress.

"I thought the young men, particularly, looked more subdued than the gray-bearded ones in their 40s and 50s," said Singer, who was a court-appointed examiner of Patricia Hearst during her trial on bank robbery charges with members of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

"I think a key fact here is that the captors were males about the same age as the younger captives, which may have made them victims of particularly sadistic treatment.



STAFF SGT. JAMES HUGHES
Returnees looked sad, he says

They (the Iranians) were probably doing a macho number on them, and dealing badly with the women as well, because of that whole middle-Eastern attitude toward females."

Others suggested that the seasoned veterans of diplomatic and military service had more discipline, stressful experience and institutional and family bonds to bolster them than the younger captives.

"It helps you hang on to your sense of self-esteem if you can find any roles to make you feel worthwhile," said Stenger in recalling his own captivity. "I was a medic — I was busy all the time."

But despite the anticipated readjustment period, authorities stress that the professional training and dedication of the hostages — most of whom volunteered for the post with the understanding that risks might be involved — will bring them through the ordeal with better-than-average results.

"These are 52 educated, well-functioning, superior people," Singer pointed out. "They're going to do a lot better than, say, 52 citizens you picked up at random one day out of the supermarket."

In their first phone calls to relatives back in the U.S. yesterday, some of the hostages made it clear that they had been psychologically, if not physically, abused by their Iranian captors.

John Limbert told his father that he spent nine months out of the 14 in solitary confinement, and others complained of being isolated from their colleagues, tied up at night, denied even bathroom privileges without asking permission, and having mail heavily censored.

And the family of Malcolm Kalp in Brockton, Mass., said they learned today that the reason nobody back home heard from him during the 444 days of captivity was that he tried to escape several times and was punished.

"He told us he was beaten by them

and placed in solitary confinement because of his escape attempts," said Kalp's sister-in-law, Linda Kalp.

The returning hostages are on "cloud nine" right now, warns Dr. Edna J. Hunter, another California psychologist who has done considerable study on POW readjustment problems. "But I do think after this initial euphoria there are tremendous readjustments to be made."

"It will take three or four weeks before the letdown comes, although I have a hunch that none of them — or their families — believe right now that there will be any problems."

Stenger said that the combination of extreme danger and total helplessness often leaves hostages with a feeling of anxiety and vulnerability similar to that of rape victims.

"When you go through a long period of time totally at the mercy of someone who is hostile or at best indifferent to your existence and when you can't do a damn thing to protect yourself, it has a disastrous effect," he said. "It's much worse than being in combat, where at least you can run, or pick up a gun and shoot back."

Stenger, who also serves as Veterans Administration coordinator for POW affairs, said studies of 94,000 surviving American POWs shows that the former prisoners suffer eight to 10 times the lingering anxiety problems of normal combat veterans.

"This doesn't mean that they're going to run around and act crazy," he added. "But such intense stress over such a long period of time manifests itself in unpredictable ways at unpredictable times. When you've lived for 15 months with the gas pedal all the way to the floor, it's certainly not going to do your motor any good."

Dr. Demetrios A. Julius, chief of psychiatric services at the Veterans Administration Center in Richmond, predicts the hostages will experience a surfacing of "real rage" after the initial sense of euphoria has passed.

"I think they'll feel a sense of deep loss over a part of their lives they can never regain," he said. "When it sinks in that the agreement specifies they can't file suits against Iran, that they can never be compensated even in this material way for what they've suffered, I think it will make some of them very, very angry."

Julius, who served as a counselor for Americans in Iran from 1977 until his flight out in January 1979, said that watching the plane land in Algiers "brought it all back, that sickly feeling of remembering how threatened we felt, the taunts and the pipe bombs, the fear of not getting out in time."

"I hope we don't forget these people six months down the road," he added. "I think we've just seen the tip of the iceberg."